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Colonel Ephraim Williams

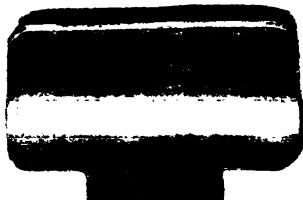
An Appreciation

BY

WILLIAM A. PEW

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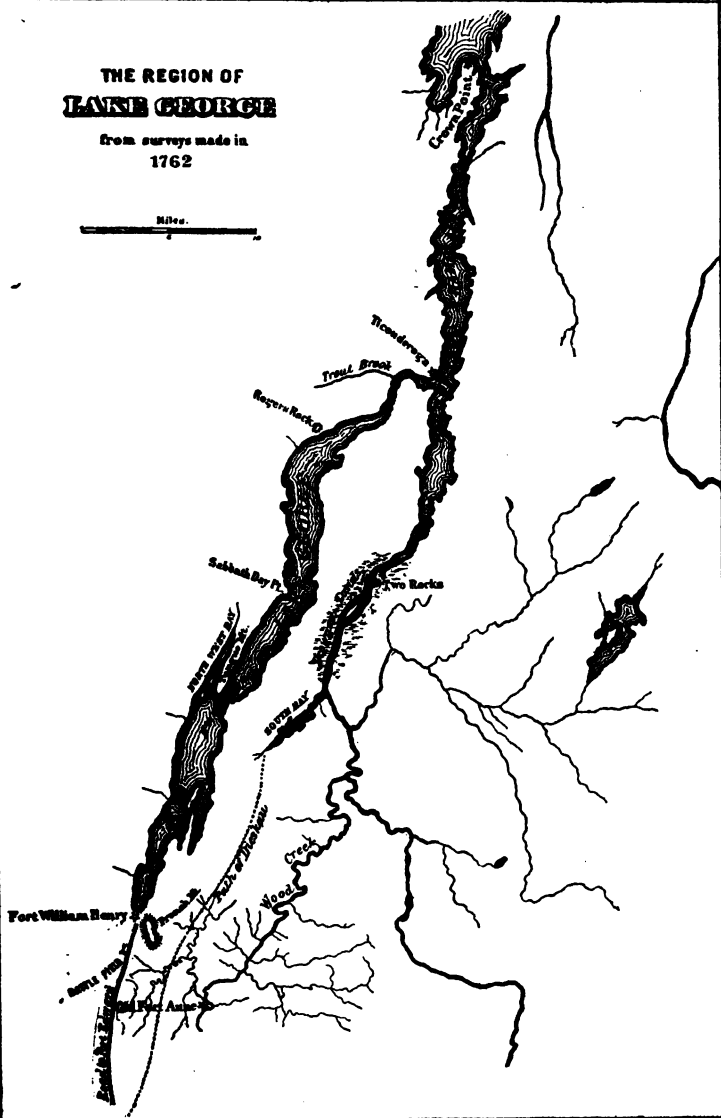


COLONEL EPHRAIM WILLIAMS

THE REGION OF
LAKE GEORGE

from surveys made in
1762

Miles.
2



Colonel Ephraim Williams

An Appreciation

BY

WILLIAM A. PEW

LATE MAJOR, U. S. A., SOMETIME COLONEL, 8TH MASS. INF. U. S. V., AND
MAJOR GENERAL, RETIRED, MASS. NATIONAL GUARD

WITH A FOREWORD BY

GENERAL LEONARD WOOD

WILLIAMSTOWN, MASS.

PRINTED FOR WILLIAMS COLLEGE

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FOREWORD

GENERAL PEW, in his "Appreciation" of Colonel Ephraim Williams of the Massachusetts Colonial Forces, has effectively removed an oft-repeated charge of carelessness and want of military skill and precaution from the record of a brave soldier who fell in a well conducted and, so far as he was concerned, bravely fought action.

In doing this he has gathered and arranged in a convincing manner much information concerning a generally misunderstood action, and has added materially to our fund of information concerning the struggles of our arms during the Colonial period.

General Pew has done this with the same thoroughness and efficiency which he displayed in the operations of the Spanish-American War and in the conduct of the National Guard of his State since that war.

The "Appreciation" is an act of tardy justice to one who well and gallantly played his part in the bitter struggle between British and French for control in North America.

LEONARD WOOD,

Maj. Genl., U. S. A.

CHICAGO, ILL.,
June 10, 1919.

COLONEL EPHRAIM WILLIAMS

An Appreciation

BY

WILLIAM A. PEW

Late Maj. U. S. A., Sometime Colonel 8th Mass. Inf. U. S. V., and
Major General retired, Mass. National Guard

WHAT do we know of Colonel Ephraim Williams? Is it possible to form a truer estimate of his worth as a soldier than history has allowed him?

In regard to his private life, the story comes down to us, that he left his small fortune as a foundation for learning, not so much from a desire to serve his fellow men, as because his cousin Elizabeth had refused his hand and all his worldly goods. Investigation discloses two cousins Elizabeth. At the time of the supposed rejection one had long since married and for some years had been dead. The other was a girl who, in Williams' lifetime, never used more than one digit to tell her age. To the latter he left his silver service and one hundred dollars. It is hardly to be supposed he offered his heart either to a lady in the grave or to one in the cradle.

May there not be some discrepancies in the other

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tradition, that he was a soldier of little capacity, fell into an ambush and was killed as a result of his own stupidity in not sending out scouts?

There is not much to guide us as we read contemporary records except common sense. We must remember Colonel Williams was not only a tried soldier, but also a man of superior intelligence, the friend of men in high places of his day and generation. There may have been a touch of irony in the man who called the Williams' family the "River Gods," but it showed them as outstanding figures among their fellows.

The fighting between the English and the French colonists was a primitive warfare. The country through which they passed was in itself an ambush. There were no railways, no telegraph or telephone connections, no air service, only paths through the forest, few and rough. Some chances had to be taken, and caution was associated with boldness but never with temerity. The commanding officer marched at the head of his troops armed with a musket. He wore his sword only on state occasions or when he had his portrait painted. In the forest forays an advance guard and scouting were the only protection. It is no more to be thought that Colonel Williams neglected his scouts, than that he left his musket hanging over the mantel shelf.

On September 8, 1755, Colonel Williams fell

in the battle known as "The Bloody Morning Scout." Major Ashley, Captains Porter, Ingersoll, and Hawley of his regiment were killed. General Johnson reported that all the chiefs of the Indians in the detachment were slain. None of the survivors who gathered around the camp fires knew what Williams and his staff had in mind. Most of them had been caught in a panic and had run away without firing their pieces.

No one on our side who was actually in the engagement has left a narrative. We have three sources of information,—the camp stories current at Fort William Henry, the official report of Dieskau, and the tales told by the Mohawk Indians on their way home. The accepted version has been largely based upon the report of deserters too frightened to know what had happened and eager to cover their own faint-heartedness.

Dr. Thomas Williams, writing to his wife under date of September 11, said, "The certainty is not yet known because those brave men, who stood fighting for our dear country, perished in the field of battle." It was easy to start the report of no service of security or information and therefore a surprise. Such stories shifted the blame and tended to cover up "the awful retreat of a certain gentleman in the army who brought up the rear. Notwithstanding express orders of our dear friend, Colonel Williams, that no man retreat upon pain

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of death, this gentleman upon first fire of the enemy gave express command 'retreat, retreat,' left their friends (who fought valiantly while they lived) to fall a prey into the hands of an enemy whose orders were most shocking that ever you heard, neither to give or take any quarters."

Most of our troops were ill clothed, ill fed, discontented, insubordinate, and sickly. Many of the officers were unfit to command. It was a hastily organized force, recently assembled at Albany, which after several reviews before Governor Shirley and General Johnson had started for Crown Point, and reached the southern end of Lake George, where they had remained inactive for over two weeks.

Reverend Charles Chauncy speaking of our soldiers said, "Many of our young men were here who never before had heard a gun fired in anger." Seth Pomroy wrote in his journal, "A number of our men who were in the van returned the fire and fought bravely, but many of our men in the rear fled."

In a letter to Colonel Israel Williams, dated September 9, Pomroy said: "There was not above one hundred of our men that fired at all. But they did with undaunted bravery and well, and answered the character of English."

Perez Marsh was surgeon's mate in the Third Bay State Regiment and great was his admiration

for Ephraim Williams. He thought of him as a rich man qualified to pass all tests likely to be imposed at the gates of heaven. He took pride in hearing him called one of the "River Gods," and in telling how the Governor and magnates at Boston listened to his advice and thought it wise, or how he persuaded with sweet reasonableness the General Court to incline his way.

Marsh wrote to his wife September 26. The story of a surprise had now become well crystallized by retelling, and Marsh had heard many explanations of the disaster. The Indians who constituted Williams' advance guard had left for their homes in central New York two days after the battle. No survivor of the advance guard remained at Fort William Henry to tell what actually took place at the beginning of the fight. Marsh said in his letter: "The most astonishing thing that happened was that Colonel Williams should go three miles from the camp with twelve hundred men, expecting an attack every minute, or at least that it was quite probable, and yet keep no scouts out. I have often heard him speak of the very thing and the danger of marching without it. That Colonel Williams should neglect this and give the enemy the best advantage you can conceive of is very remarkable."

The above quotation is interesting as showing the beginning of a tradition. The writer was swept

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into a belief in Williams' incompetency by an unconscious sympathy with his surroundings. Marsh was right. It was remarkable if it happened that way.

The story of the Battle of Lake George is usually told somewhat as follows: The command of the expedition against Crown Point in the year 1755 was given to General William Johnson. Johnson was no soldier, but had great influence with the Indians. During the late summer he assembled a force of New England militia at Albany. They were mostly farmers, except a few Indian fighters who had served under Colonel Williams on the Massachusetts border. These were joined by a party of a few hundred Mohawks. A part of Johnson's force was encamped at Lake George, where it was engaged in building boats. The remainder was at Fort Edwards on the Hudson, forwarding supplies. While the English preparations were proceeding tardily Dieskau, commander of the French force, was not inactive. He was a brilliant soldier, a pupil of Marshal Saxe, and endowed with great energy. With a picked force he came down Lake Champlain and advanced between the two English forces. On the morning of September 8 General Johnson ordered a reconnaissance in force under Colonel Williams and the Indian chief Hendrick. They fell into an ambush prepared by Dieskau. Both were killed and their

command defeated. The French followed up their advantage and closely pursued, hoping to enter Fort William Henry with the fugitives. They met a hot reception at the fort, where, after fighting several hours, they withdrew, leaving their general severely wounded and a prisoner of the English. As the French retreated they fell in with a party coming from Fort Edwards, whereby they suffered farther losses. The victory at Lake George inspired the Colonists with a new confidence. In this battle Lyman, Putnam, and Stark, names to become illustrious, received their first baptism of fire. General Johnson was made a baronet and received a grant of five thousand pounds.

Fort William Henry was situated at the southern end of Lake George. It was connected by a wagon road with Fort Edwards on the upper reaches of the Hudson. On the evening of September 7 General Johnson knew that a large body of French and Indians had landed at South Bay on Lake Champlain, and proceeded to the wood road connecting Forts Edwards and William Henry. Their mission was evidently an attack on one of the two forts. There was nothing else to do.

General Johnson supposed that the enemy would make an attack upon Fort Edwards. Accordingly he detailed Colonel Williams with about one thousand soldiers and two hundred Indians to march, as he said, "in order to catch the enemy

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in their retreat from the other camp, either as victors, or defeated in their design."

Williams marched in the morning with a division of five hundred men. His Indians were not ready. As an eyewitness described it, "The Indians some afore, some in the middle, and some in the rear, and so on throughout as they got ready to march." After marching a couple of miles, Williams halted, threw out march outposts and waited until he was joined by the remainder of his detachment. He was ready to resume his march about ten o'clock. His advance guard then consisted of all the Indians under the command of Chief Hendrick. His main body consisted of about one thousand men.

The weather was pleasant and the wind from the south. No musketry fire had been heard from the direction of Fort Edwards.

Hoyt in his "Antiquarian Researches" reports the following story by a survivor: "During this halt flankers were thrown out on the right and left, in the thick woods, and while in this position a drove of deer rushed down the valley and passed between the men, indicating great fright. No suspicions, however, were entertained that they were frightened by the enemy."

At Chancellorsville, when Jackson turned our right flank and was bearing down on the 11th Corps, his advance was preceded by a flight of wild animals which had been startled by his de-

ployed line. I have seen the same thing in a manoeuvre through the thickets of Chickamauga. A drove of frightened deer rushing north along the wood road could have had but one meaning for two old fighters like Williams and Hendrick. It was probably at this time Hendrick said to Williams, "I smell indians." It was their last interview. When the advance was continued Williams was at the head of the main body and Hendrick at the head of the advance guard. Hendrick was a Mohegan who had been adopted into the Mohawk tribe. He had spent over forty years scouting and on Indian raids. That they had heard no musketry from the direction of Fort Edwards, and that their outposts were rushed by frightened deer must have been notice to Williams and Hendrick that they were in close proximity to the enemy. Their meeting in the next half hour could not have come as a surprise to either of them.

It was proper that the Indians should form the advance guard. They were the trained scouts of the army.

General Johnson said in his official report that after this halt, "Our party then marched forward, the indians leading the van, one of the enemy's muskets by accident went off, which alarmed our people and discovered the enemy, who immediately began their fire on our indians, who finding the enemy on all sides retreated to Colonel Williams

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who was at some small distance. The engagement then began on both sides. The Indians and the van of our people sustained the warmest fire and amongst them was the greatest slaughter. Whilst the rest of our troops were marching up to support them, the enemy who were much superior in number began to spread themselves in order to surround us. Our officers then thought it prudent to retreat toward the camp and our men fled that way."

It has been repeatedly said that Williams' advance guard was not preceded by scouts. M. de Vaudreuil, the Governor of Canada, in his official report under date of September 25 said, in speaking of Baron Dieskau's advance, "When he was about a league from the enemy's camp, his scouts brought him in two Englishmen, who told him that a large body of English and Indians were following them." It would seem from this report that Williams' advance guard was preceded by some sort of a scouting party. Who, otherwise, were the captives who gave accurate information? It is not to be supposed that they were two Englishmen taking a casual morning stroll. Their position and information indicate they were members of a patrol.

After reading all the contemporary literature bearing on this fight, it is evident Colonel Williams fell fighting like a gallant soldier. That he was

surprised is not justified in any narrative of the facts told by those who draw this conclusion. He knew the French were ten miles from Fort William Henry the night before. His ears must have told him that nothing had occurred in the nature of an attack against Fort Edwards up to ten o'clock that morning. Therefore the French were moving against Fort William Henry. This was probably in his mind when he halted and reorganized his force. It is quite impossible to accept the statement that the frightened deer roused no suspicions among his two hundred Indians.

Williams' plan must have been to use the Indians to beat up the French, and under cover of this advance guard use his main body as circumstances required. His formations were correct. If the Indians ran into an ambush that was their mission. Advanced guards are pushed forward to find such things. There can be no doubt Dieskau did plan an ambush, but, as will appear later from his report, it was unsuccessful either because discovered by the Mohawks or disclosed by the treachery of the Iroquois.

In regard to Williams' leadership, the common estimate that he lacked military capacity is wrong. What he attempted was well planned. Its execution depended upon the character of the soldiers. They were mostly without military training. Those within the sphere of his personal influence

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responded to his example and fought bravely. These may have been the few he had trained in previous years at forts Coleraine, Vernon, and Massachusetts. If Pomroy's estimate is correct only about one hundred of our men were dependable. After Williams was killed these fell back before the attack of the regulars. Considering the character of the country and the forces involved, Williams' plan of advance was superior to that of his opponent, Baron Dieskau.

Baron Dieskau's order for his march and attack on the morning of September 8 reads: "When the army will march in three columns, the order of battle that has been laid down will be followed, and one column will be kept at least one hundred paces distant from the other, in order that the French battalions have room to form themselves into a line of battle—when so directed.

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"Should the army march in three columns, and it be necessary to fight the enemy in that order, in the forest, then Mr. de Saint Pierre will make a most vigorous attack with the Indians and Mr. de Repentigny's corps. . . . He will be sustained by the three columns; that of the right marching Canadian fashion, will go beyond the enemy, in order to attack his flank.

"The left column will do the same on its side, and the column consisting of the battalions of

France, will march directly against the enemy and attack in columns, unless it be ordered to form a line which will not fail to happen, if the ground allow it; these battalions will make their attack as regular troops ought to do, without breaking and scattering."

No mention is made of an advance guard. Undoubtedly he made use of patrols, as he knew of Williams' approach and had captured two English scouts.

M. de Vaudreuil, the Governor of Canada, commenting upon this formation, says, "Each column was about thirty paces apart, so that the Canadians and Indians were obliged to advance through the woods and on the mountains to preserve that order of march which seriously fatigued them."

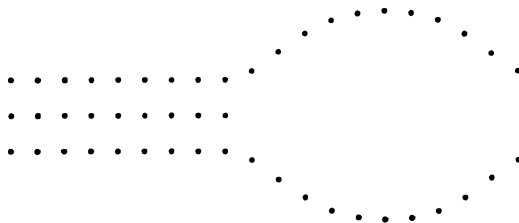
The object of this formation was to facilitate a rapid deployment and to envelop the enemy's flanks before he could form line. This formation was tried by General Abercromby in his advance against Ticonderoga, and resulted in great confusion. Forbes used it in his approach against Fort Duquesne.

Up to the beginning of the battle the advantage of leadership was with the English.

Just before meeting the enemy Dieskau halted his center column, which consisted of French regulars, and advanced his two flank columns. This constituted the ambush.

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We have two plans drawn soon after the battle. Reverend Samuel Chandler, who was a clergyman at Gloucester, Massachusetts, joined as chaplain the Essex County Regiment sent to the relief of General Johnson. In his diary under date of October 17, 1755, he says: "The position of the enemy when they met Colonel Williams



The regulars in a body and the Indians and the Canadians in the flank in two half moons."

Samuel Blodget, who was a sutler at Fort William Henry, published a pictorial representation of the Bloody Morning Scout and the attack upon Fort William Henry. His accompanying narrative is interesting as a description of the ground. He describes the land on Williams' left as covered with a thatch growth descending to a ravine. On his right was an eminence covered with rocks, trees, and shrubs. The French formation was that of a hook, with their left farther advanced than their right.

The impression given by these two drawings is that the French formed a *cul de sac* into which the

English advanced, whereupon the two flank columns closed in upon the English and opened fire. Such a proceeding would have been as dangerous to the French as to the English. There was nothing to prevent the fire of one French column destroying the other.

Dr. Timothy Dwight, President of Yale College, went over this ground. His description in "Travels in New England and New York" is probably more accurate. He says: "Colonel Williams met the enemy at Rocky Brook, four miles from Lake George. Dieskau had been informed of his approach by his scouts; and arranged his men, . . . extending his line on both sides of the road in the form of a half moon."

Dieskau's scheme was to catch Williams' main column before they had a chance to deploy. This half-moon formation would give him a superiority of fire. It was to guard against such tactics that Williams employed his Indians as an advance guard.

John Burk, the captain lieutenant in Williams' own company, who was not in the fight, wrote to his wife under date of September 11: "On the 7th inst. our Indians discovered the track of a large body of the enemy East of us. On the eighth Colonel Williams with a detachment of one thousand strong, marched in pursuit, or to make discovery. They marched in the road 3 miles south, and

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being discovered by the enemy, (as we are told by the French General who is taken by us) were way-laid by eighteen hundred French and Indians. The French lay on one side of the road on rising ground; the Indians on the other side in a swamp. Part of the French were regular troops: these lay south. Their scheme was to let our men march quite to the south end of the ambush, the regular troops to give the first fire, then all to fire and rush out; which if they had done they would have cut our men all to pieces. But the general says that a beady Indian, who was very eager, fired as soon as they entered the ambush."

In his official report to the Minister of War, Dieskau describes what he intended and what occurred. "Before quitting Montreal, I had already various reasons for suspecting the fidelity of the domiciliated Iroquois both of Sault St. Louis and the Lake of the Two Mountains, whose number exceeded 800 composing half of the Indians that had been given to me. I represented it repeatedly to M. de Vaudreuil, who would never admit it, but scarcely had I arrived at Fort St. Frederic, than I had occasion to furnish him still stronger proofs thereof.

"For more than fifteen days that I was encamped under that fort, I encountered nothing but difficulties from the Indians; those who were good, were spoiled by the Iroquois. Never was I able to ob-

tain from them a faithful scout; at one time they refused to make any; at another time, seeming to obey me, they set forth, but when a few leagues from the camp, they sent back the Frenchmen I had associated with them, and used to return within a few days without bringing me any intelligence. Such has been the conduct of the Indians, caused by the Iroquois. My letters from Fort St. Frederic to M. de Vaudreuil and M. Bigot, sufficiently develop the particulars of their mischievous intrigues.

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“On the following day, the 8th of September, I commenced my march. About ten of the clock, after having proceeded five leagues, the scouts reported to me that they had seen a large body of troops on their way to the fort, which news was confirmed by a prisoner taken at the time. They consisted of one thousand men or more, that had left the camp to reinforce the fort. I immediately made my arrangement, ordered the Indians to throw themselves into the woods, to allow the enemy to pass, so as to attack them in the rear, whilst the Canadians took them on the flank, and I should wait for them in front with the regular troops.

“This was the moment of treachery. The Iroquois, who were on the left, showed themselves before the time and did not fire. The Abenakis who

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occupied the right, seeing themselves discovered, alone with a few Canadians attacked the enemy in front and put them to flight. I immediately prepared to join them, in order to accompany the fugitives into their camp, though still more than a league off.

“Meanwhile the Iroquois collected on a hill, unwilling to advance. Some of them even wanted to force the Abenakis to release three Mohocks whom they had captured at the first encounter. I am ignorant of the result of that quarrel but the Abenakis, seeing the Iroquois immovable, halted also, and the Canadians seeing the retreat of the one and the other, were thereby intimidated.”

There is another version of the charge of Iroquois treachery which was told by the Mohawks on their way home. I find two references to this story in contemporary correspondence.

Pownall in a letter to the Lords of Trade, dated New York, September 20, says: “There are many further accounts brought down from Albany by the Schippers of which the following is one. That when the French Indians were for standing aside and letting the English and French decide the quarrel, old Hendrick declared for war and fired the first shot.” The other is in a news letter written by Daniel Dulaney at Annapolis, December 9. He says: “I am but just returned from New York, whither I went to accompany our Governor at his

request, and by all that I could collect there, the New England people did not behave so well as might have been wished, and nothing but the cowardice of the enemy saved them. Mr. Johnson having received intelligence that a large body of the enemy were in motion, sent out a party of one thousand or twelve hundred men under the command of the Colonels Williams and Whiting to reconnoitre them. The enemy, also having intelligence of the march of this body of men, formed in an ambuscade, into which our people would have inevitably fallen, had it not been for the following extraordinary accident. Among this party under the command of Williams and Whiting were several of the Mohocks, as there were of the Potmewagoes among the French. When our Indians who were in front were within gunshot of the French Indians, they discovered themselves by rising up, and discharging their pieces in the air in token of friendship to our Indians, and immediately proposed to them to withdraw themselves from the English and French troops, and leave it to them to decide their own quarrel. To this proposition many of the Mohocks began to listen, when old Hendrick, fearing the consequence, if this treaty was not interrupted, immediately shot one of the French Indians, and thus the engagement began."

When a charge of treachery is made we look for

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an instigator and his motive. The reports of Pownall and Dulaney say that Hendrick broke up the parley and started the fighting. It is more likely the fighting was started by a French officer, serving with the Indians. We would gain much by detaching the French Indians, who greatly outnumbered ours. It is quite probable that Williams and Hendrick were the instigators of this plot, hoping thereby to discourage the remaining Indians and Canadians and then surround the small body of French regulars and defeat them with their open-order skirmish formation. Dieskau seems to have run up against a modern trick like the German propaganda before the Italian *débâcle*. That the scheme was partially successful appears in Dieskau's report. Unfortunately Williams and Hendrick were shot. After their fall a panic ensued, during which a few hundred regulars drove our force back to Fort William Henry.

Pomroy told Dr. Dwight that just before the Mohawks left Fort William Henry they were harangued by Hendrick. He said he did not understand a word of the language but was more deeply affected by this speech than by any other he had ever heard. It is possible Hendrick was disclosing to his followers his plan of detaching the Iroquois. Both Mohawk and Iroquois were members of the same confederacy. They were never anxious to fight each other. The Iroquois occupied the ad-

vanced left of Dieskau's position and were the first enemy encountered by the Mohawks. Some sort of powwow preceded the fight. This seems to dispose of the story of a surprise and successful ambush.

It is certain that something occurred between the Iroquois and the Mohawks which justified the letter of Dieskau to the Governor of Canada, in which he said: "I am defeated; my detachment is routed; a number of men are killed and thirty or forty are prisoners, as I am told. I and M. Bernier, my Aid de Camp, are among the latter, I have received for my share, four gunshot wounds, one of which is mortal. I owe this misfortune to the treachery of the Iroquois. Our affair was well begun, but as soon as the Iroquois perceived some Mohawks, they came to a dead halt, the Abenakis and other Indians continued some time, but disappeared also by degrees; this disheartened the Canadians, so that I found myself with the French troops engaged almost alone. I bore the attack, believing that I might rally the Canadians and perhaps the Indians, in which I did not succeed. The Regulars received the whole of the enemy's fire, and were almost cut to pieces. I prophesied to you, Sir, that the Iroquois would play some scurvy trick; it is unfortunate for me that I am such a good prophet."

This charge of a "scurvy trick" implies something more than that a crazy Indian disclosed the

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ambush by shooting in a moment of excitement. What actually took place can never be known. It seems probable that Williams and Hendrick, who were friends at Stockbridge, formed some scheme which, although not thoroughly successful in the morning fight, did frustrate the plans of the enemy, and contributed materially to our victory later by sowing the seeds of distrust between the French and their Indian allies.

It is unfortunate that those who shared Williams' counsel fell beside him, and the reputation of a brave soldier has been dimmed by the tongues of those who were running away while he was in the midst of battle.

A careful survey of what evidence remains seems to prove beyond question that Williams took every reasonable precaution to protect his march. His advance was regular and in proper form. He was not surprised and did not fall into an ambush. Whether the Iroquois succumbed to propaganda or were simply unwilling to fight, Williams was pushing forward to take advantage of the situation when he fell. With his death all energy disappeared and hope of victory vanished.

Ephraim Williams was one of New England's fine and sturdy sons. He was tall and well proportioned, in many ways resembling Washington, but handsomer and more at ease in society. An

ideal officer, punctilious in dress and deportment, solicitous in his care for officers and men (always struggling for a full complement of supplies which the General Court voted with reluctance and which were tardy in forthcoming), demanding much of subordinates, but bearing his full share in every hardship and privation. He served his country and his fellow men, feared God, and honored his king. Williams College is happy in bearing his name. When we speak it, let us remember the greatness of its founder was in service. As Phillips Brooks said in regard to Washington: "Let us cultivate reverence for greatness. Teach it to our children. Cultivate a perception of it. The double blessing of pattern and power."

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